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WAR DAUBS: POEMS

WAR DAUBS:
POEMS
BY R. WATSON KERR

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TO

MY BROTHER GEORGE

KILLED IN ACTION
IN GALLIPOLI

MAY 3RD, 1915

"He lives, embalmed, unchanging, and apart"

I GIVE thanks to the Editors of "The English Review," "The Poetry Review," and "More Songs of Soldier Poets," for permission to reprint several of the Poems in the present Volume.

R. W. K.

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WAR DAUBS: POEMS

A VIGNETTE

On stark and tortured wire
Where refuse of war lies
Tangled in mire—
When God is flinging
Rain down the skies—
Sit three little birds, singing.

FROM THE LINE

Have you seen men come from the Line,
Tottering, doddering, as if bad wine
Had drugged their very souls ;
Their garments rent with holes
And caked with mud
And streaked with blood
Of others, or their own ;
Haggard, weary-limbed and chilled to the bone,
Trudging aimless, hopeless, on
With listless eyes and faces drawn
Taut with woe ?

Have you seen them aimless go

FROM THE LINE

Bowed down with muddy pack
And muddy rifle slung on back,
And soaking overcoat,
Staring on with eyes that note
Nothing but the mire
Quenched of every fire?

Have you seen men when they come
From shell-holes filled with scum
Of mud and blood and flesh,
Where there's nothing fresh
Like grass, or trees, or flowers,
And the numbing year-like hours
Lag on—drag on,
And the hopeless dawn
Brings naught but death, and rain—
The rain a fiend of pain

That scourges without end,
And Death, a smiling friend?

Have you seen men when they come from hell?
If not,—ah, well
Speak not with easy eloquence
That seems like sense
Of 'War and its Necessity'!
And do not rant, I pray,
On 'War's Magnificent Nobility'!

If you've seen men come from the Line
You'll know it's Peace that is divine!
If you've not seen the things I've sung—
Let silence bind your tongue,
But, make all wars to cease,
And work, and work for Everlasting Peace!

TO A SORROWING MOTHER

You hide your grief, Mother,
  But in lonely twilight times
You silently weep for another
  Who is dead.

Alone, you mourn thus ;
  That he, whose only dirge was the wind,
Should be unwept by us
  Who laugh :

That we should coarsely sing
  In selfish merriment, unheeding,
Thoughtless of a thing
  Like his death.

But, ah! Sorrowing Mother,
  Can we not also smile and hide
Our grief, who mourn a brother—
  Secretly?

THE CORPSE

It lay on the hill,
A sack on its face,
Collarless,
Stiff and still,
Its two feet bare
And very white;
Its tunic tossed in sight
And not a button there—
Small trace
Of clothes upon its back—
Thank God! it had a sack
Upon its face!

MUSIC IN A DUG-OUT

The hour is drowsed with things of sleep
That round my tottering senses creep
Like subtle wandering scents, so rare
They might ensweeten fairies' hair;
And I am walking in a glade
With gold and green and purple made
Unearthly beautiful:
And, oh, the air is very cool!

I see green lawns between the trees,
And cows and sheep upon the leas,
And, in the distance, hills;
And at my feet cool, mossy rills

MUSIC IN A DUG-OUT

Empurpled with the wavering shade
Of trees and bushes in the glade ;
And ever I rejoice
And ever sings a voice.

I see—but, sudden the singing ceases,
Splintering my dream in pieces—

I see, in waving candle light
That cowers and flickers in a draft,
A low-roofed den—a hole of night—
That leaks to heaven by creaky shaft ;
A table (where the candle stands
In bottle streaked with frozen strands
Of tallow drippings), strewn with tins
And cans, just tiny refuse bins
With smelling slops of tea and jam
And twisted greasy bits of ham ;

And belts hung round the dingy walls
Like horses' harness in their stalls ;
And in the corner gloom, alone—
A dusty, silent gramophone !

A PORTRAIT

WALKING among men like a phantom,
With vacant eyes and listless air,
Unmarked, befriended, jeered at, laughed at,
Only smiling in reply
And drawing into self again
Like a sensitive snail within its shell;
Outwardly complaisant, satisfied, serene;
Inwardly, ah! inwardly,
A racked and tortured desert
Empty of everything but dreams—
Desires, ambitions,—dreams that come to naught
But leave the mind limp, exhausted,

Till it sees the world and life
Labelled with " Hopeless."

A ship without a compass
Floundering in dark and forlorn waters ;
Seeing no harbour,
Knowing no goal,
But buffeted on relentless winds
That make the framework creak
And the nails burst !
A mind that grinds and grinds and grinds
When there's nothing in it to grind,
Gnawing itself away in frenzied toil,
And producing—
Nothing !

THE GRAVE-DIGGER

A DIGGER he digs in the dark
In the naked remains of a wood,
For his friend that lies stiff and stark,
On his head hard blood for a hood :

The digging is painful and slow,
Yet the digger he sweats like a slave—
But he didn't know what I now know ;
The digger he dug his own grave !

RAIN

I

Ah ! when it rains all day
And the sky is a mist
That creeps by chillily
Where sun once kissed,
Like death pale shroud,
My soul cries out aloud
In hopeless misery.

II

I cannot read nor write
A line for gloom,
My life lags, drenched of light
To cheer its tomb ;

Chill and wet,
Comfortless I fret
In hopeless night !

III

And naught to hear but rain
Battering the ground !
O numbing pain !
O maddening sound !
Drowned in sky
Trees drip, drip, and sigh
And drip, drip again.

HOOGE

The moon—frozen eye—
Stares down stupidly,
And the wind licks
A few bare sticks,
Once trees:

And near the craters on the ground
Where the road winds round
Like wounded snake,
One sees
A painted wooden stake!

A DEAD MAN

A DEAD man dead for weeks
Is sickening food for lover's eye
That seeks and ever seeks
A fair one's beauty ardently!

Did that thing live of late?
That sodden thing of ebony head
With empty holes that gape?
Good God! will I be that, when dead?

Perhaps those blackened bones
Were subtly fashioned hand and wrist
That made sweet violin tones,
Or held a face till lips had kissed!

Perhaps—but, no ! it cannot be,
This thing is but a heap of slime—
A hideous mockery—
The man is safe from rotting Time :

Then stick it under ground !
It is a thing for spades not tears ;
And make no mourning sound,
And finished, have no fears :

For, glowing in some woman's heart,
He lives embalmed, unchanging, and apart !

Then come ! let's kill the memory of this place—
O friends ! it had a hideous, ebony face !

LINES

It is not sweet to die for one's countree :
I saw a dead man stinking in a trench
Where even flies would sicken with the stench ;
Ah ! is it sweet to die for one's countree ?

His face had rotted black as ebony,
His eyes were empty, but his teeth were in
And horridly they made his face to grin ;
It is not sweet to die for one's countree.

Yet if—if I the living soul could see
That sings glad triumph songs unearthily,
Then might I make a sweeter song and say,
' Surely 'tis sweet to die for one's countree ! '

REBUKE

As one who was rebuked I stood
In silence by the sea ;
The stars were pale and faint—a brood
Of angel eyes to me :

The dim red flush of evening lay
Like rose leaves in the west,
And fishing boats slept in the bay
Like weary birds at rest.

As one who was rebuked I stood
In wonder by the sea ;
And in the beauty, lo ! I could
Attain Serenity !

THE ANCIENT THOUGHT

The round moon hangs like a yellow lantern in the
trees
That lie like lace against the silk-blue sky,
Oh, still the night ! Oh, hushed the breeze—
Surely God is nigh.

ARRAS, 1917

I HEAR a rat scurrying
At the end o' the street
Across the moon-lit stones, hurrying
To dingier retreat—
A ruined house against the moon,
Black like cob-web silhouette—
And the wind runs around
Like a whining hound
Seeking its master,
Faster and faster ;
And I'll never forget
How chill strikes the moon !

ARRAS, 1917

And a heavy sound,
A hollow tread, comes after me—
I never glance around,
But, onward hurrying, flee
From the haunting dread
Of the unknown tread;
And I hold my breath:
Is it Death?

. . . .

This is a city desolate;
It stands, but not inviolate,
A virgin place that rape
Has spoiled in brutish fight
Of soul that, sobbing, seeming dies:
And the black windows gape
Like anguished eyes
In mute horror thro' the night!

Ah ! is the bruisèd spirit fled ?
Come ! and I will lead thro' winding thread
Of pulseless streets, blanched with light
Of th' anæmic moon, coldly bright !

Follow me, and I will lead a quest
Along lone lanes by saintly stones oppressed.
Fear not the shadows ! look, how warm
And golden strikes that streak of light
That steals, like ghostly finger form,
Into the heart of night !
Behind that broken barricade
There dwells a man, a woman, and a maid;
They vend their wares all day
In humble, cheery, careless way,
And whisper low of days gone by—
See there, the city's soul

That pulses on with irresistless roll
To a future, mightier destiny!

And gleams it still in many a dingy hole
Thro'out this sad, sepulchral place!
It breathes in cellar like a mole;
It smiles with wistful face;
It walks the silent street;
And you hear its accents in the wandering feet
Of haggard women, trudging to the ground
Where food is to be found!

One day that soul that wails in low lament
In darkness, will arise—renewed and strong—
Jubilant with reincarnate faith—a song
Of triumph from its fiery lips sent
Ringing to the astonished firmament—

Music that will never die,
A swelling, surging song of Liberty!
Martyrdom will cease
And Freedom come again with Peace;
And jostling, hustling throngs,
Singing o'er a hundred wrongs,
Panting, laughing, crying,
Weeping, shouting, sighing
Will rush like rising sea
Into the empty streets, bellowing Victory!

. . . . .

But still the wind runs around
Like a whining hound
Seeking its master,
Faster and faster;
And a heavy sound,
A hollow tread comes after me—

ARRAS, 1917

I never glance around,
But, onward hurrying, flee
From the haunting dread
Of the Unknown Tread ;
And I hold my breath :
Is it Death ?

HOME

A HISSING stove whose pale blue flame
Boils peeled potatoes pillaged without shame
The night before from captured village where
The Germans were, not long ago ; a chair,
A wooden table ; and in glimmerings shed
By one small candle's light, a wooden bed
Or two, mattressed with small heaps of straw
Or shreds of wood ; and round about where paw
Of reckless conquerors has been,—wild strewn,—
A sty of food and tins and drink, all thrown
Down in picturesque disorder. Then,
Along low wood-walled passages the den,
Our German Dug-Out—leaks into the sky
By stair-cased rough-shod shafts steep and high.

FAITH

I HAVE leaned on God
And have been comforted by Him :
My fears have been allayed ;
My terror of Death has been forgotten ;
My frightened heart
Has ceased its knocking ;
And my pulse has steadied,
And my resolution cleared and steeled.
I have placed my life in His hands
To take or leave,
To break or fracture—
As a lover gives her all,
Her body and her soul,

Unto the man she loves,
So I have given my all to God,
Surrendered to His Will
In absolute submission :
And in the hour of battle I am unafraid,
And I can put my finger to my nose at Death,
For I am not my own, but God's.

If He should will it,
He will put a bullet thro' my head ;
Or tear my limbs asunder with a shell ;
Or glean my entrails out ;
Or make me foam and choke with gas :
And 'twill be well.

But, if He will it,
He will turn the bullets in their flight ;

FAITH

Will make a stoppage in a gun ;
Or make a gunner's hand to tremble,
That his aim be false—

And winds of bullets will cool my cheeks,
And shrapnel fall like blossoms on my head !

THE VISION

Lo ! there she comes from afar !
Her eyes tender as moonlight
Or the evening star
On a purple night
In Autumn ! See !
She is fair as a swan
Sailing at dawn
On a tree-gloomed lake
Richly and wond'rously opaque,
By water-lilies, silently !

DENIAL

If I should die—chatter only this :—
'A bullet flew by that did not miss !'
I did not give life up because of a friend ;
That bullet came thro', and that was the end !

Don't put up a cross where my dung will be laid,
But scatter some wheat—and bread will be made ;
Don't say I'm a hero because I was shot ;
A bullet won't make one what one is not.

Don't scribble my name upon Honour's scroll
And plaster it up on the Churches hall :
What honour is there in being forced to die ?
We slaughter a pig—but we make it a fry !

And what are the odds 'tween the pig and I?
The pig can't help dying—he is forced to die;
And so with myself, when a bullet comes thro'
I simply must die—then why the ado?

Oh! if I should die—chatter only this—
'A bullet flew by that did not miss';
I did not give life up because of a friend;
That bullet came thro'—and *voilà*, the end!'

RESOLVE

Let me not think of blood to-night—
So doing
It will be harder still to fight :
Peace's wooing
Sucks blood making me white
And tremulous—
Thus, thus
I will harden yet my heart
Gaze into horror's face
Unafraid, without a trace
Of tenderness !

JUNE, 1918

June ! the joyous, sun-filled month of June
When roses, emblems of a heaven, croon
Strange melodies in garden and in hedge
With blithesome birds that sing in emerald edge
Of English lanes ; and thousand other flow'rs
As sweet drench incense on the air in show'rs—
Intoxicating wine that gives fair dreams
Of Palaces in Paradise, and streams
Of visions far surpassing Kubla Khan !
When cool sweet winds blow from the woods to fan
Two lovers lying, kissing in the grass
Where sun-lit waters glimpse and, laughing, pass.

JUNE, 1918

June ! a writhing, war-gorged month of hell
When steel and iron and high explosive yell
Cursed cacophonics in blasted plains,
With singeing bullets singing in the lanes
Of ripped France ; and poisonous vapours drench
With death the air and earth—pocked with trench
And gaping scar—so he who breathes them in
Gulps strangling hands that clutch and tear at him,
And vision sees of no cool Kubla Khan ;
When rancid gusts from charnel tree-stumps fan
Two soldiers, clutching, kissing in the grass ;
Whose souls leak out in spurting red, and pass !

STANDING BY
(DESOLATORY REFLECTIONS)

O SPIRIT of my Fate keen-eyed, firm-lipped!
Thou lead'st me not to pleasant places, dipt
Rich in gold of setting suns, where dance
Slim sylphs in silken draperies, who glance
With luring elfish eyes as they flit away—
Their white limbs twinkling in the gloom;
    or say
(For vision lags) to those dim aisles of Faerie
Where my craving soul would fain be led:
Ah! no. Thou hurriest me to fields where dead
Glue piteous eyes on me, each eye a curse!

STANDING BY

Relentless Fate, thou drivest on, steel-lipped !—
And I rebel !—with frantic passion gript,
Shrinking from lurid horrors that I see
Revealed, in stark display, awaiting me !
And War I do curse ! and gruesome, ogling death !

O you ! condemn me not with scorning breath,
Who sit at home secure, in cushioned ease
At peace, penning glib sonnets wrought to please,
On War, and Pain, and Heaven and Sacrifice,
Saying, " He who for his country dies
Is blest ! " and making sestets nobly end
With ' Death ! the sweet-toned, ever-welcome
Friend ' !
(O Death ! sweet welcome Friend ! no friend of
mine
Art Thou) !

Ah, no ! That clear pure sight of thine
Is not in me ; I hear no fairy bells
On battlefields, no visions see of wells
Of rest, or hear no inner voice that sings ;
Or feel the fluttering of angel wings,
Sheltering around,—but only Death
I see, and Carnage, reeking with nauseous breath,
Leering in War's hideous company
With gorged Destruction, Lust and Misery !

Oh ! I would rather gaze on beauty's face
In some dim woodland grove, and dreaming, chase
In rich-hued phantasy, all loveliness
Of perfume, form, and sound ; and wake to see
The still twilight steal soft and holily
Into the wood, and in the solemn deep
Of eve, when birds and beasts are all asleep

STANDING BY

And not a leaf or flower is swaying, feel
The hush of God !
But, ah ! I cannot ! Steel
And iron and lead and poison gas and blood
Blur my vision, blinding it with mud
Of harsh reality ! I see grim sights,
And smell foul smells, and in some awful nights
I see gaunt long-nailed Death with grinning jaws
Stalking, creaking in his joints, with claws
Out-stretched to grip me !
Oh ! how can I pen sweet songs
On noble themes, when all I see belongs
To hell ? War is no glorious, cleansing thing ;
And Death no gentle-mannered Saviour King !—
But off ! Begone ! This whining piteous fret !
War will not crush me—I am a soldier yet !

WAR DAUBS

Come ! Spirit of my Fate, whate'er thou hast
In store for me—where'er my lot is cast
In War's grim jaws—I'll strive to face, and fight,
With proud rejoicing reckless might !
And should Death have me in his thumb-smudged
Book
Dog-eared and grimy, with unwavering look
I'll face him to the last and, fighting, fall
With scorn upon my face for Hell and all
Its despicable crew !

But still I pray,
Spirit of my Fate ! that thou hast stored away
For me, in some fair peaceful place, a spot
Where Death and War and Pain will be forgot ;
And where, alive, dead friends will merry be
'Mid song-filled homes in Paradise with me.

SOUNDS BY NIGHT

I HEAR the dull, low thunder of the guns
Beyond the hills that doze uneasily,
A sullen doomful growl that ever runs
From end to end of the heavy freighted sky;
A friend of mine writes, squatted on the floor,
And scrapes by yellow spluttering candle light.
"Ah! hush!" he breathes, and gazes at the door
That creeks on rusty hinge, in pale affright.
(No words spoke he, nor I, for well we knew
What rueful things these sounds did tell.)
A pause—I hear the trees sway sighing thro'
The gloom, like dismal moan of hollow knell,
Then out across the dark, and startling me
Bursts forth a laugh, a shout of drunken glee!

THE GAFF

Out, out into the wind-swept cleansing night
Whose purple canopy, the sky, is bright
With the soft splendour of the full round moon
And a thousand stars that mystically croon
Strange melodies upborne on the cooling wind!
Out into the night I plunge, my fevered mind
Hot and drunk.

Out to the night from the stenches
Of a swelt'ring music-hall where leering wenches,
Sickly pale, nudge lustfully in glee the men
That smoke and sweat in their music-den
Like bestial things; where the reeking pit
Vomits out its noise of ribald wit,

THE GAFF

The click of glasses in its bar in the rear
Where bloated men swill nauseous beer;
Its drunken babbling, oaths, hysteric glee,
Licentious talk and loathsome waggery;
Where huddled men and women sit in swarms,
All sensual and sweating all, on forms
Above a spittle-littered floor; and where
Tall men with silent philosophic air
Y-clad in tawdry braided gold, spit out
Tobacco juice and, watching, prowl about!
Out from the garish stage flashed bright with lights
That lure the eyes of the sweating crowd to sights
And things they lust for, women showing legs,
And more (like that fat girl, half nude, that begs
Her languid lover's ravishing embrace
And smiles hideously in his grinning face);
Full-limbed, tight-laced wantons singing all

WAR DAUBS

Delirious songs of love that shrilly fall
On the gloating herds like balm; voluptuous
dancing,
And the winking chorus, ludicrously prancing
On behind, like animated dolls . . . !
Ugh, enough! this tinsel show appals
My soul. Away this gruesome glare! Away
This carnival of gay indelicacy,
Gross and joyless!
Out I rush to the night
Whose purple covering, the sky, is bright
With the soft splendour of a million stars
And the mystic moon. Out, out, to list to bars
Of delicious music mingled with the scent
Of hidden flowers, that surely ne'er was meant
For man! Out, out, to wash my jaded soul
With cooling airs from the star-wrought purple bowl

THE GAFF

Of night, in the vast solemnity
Of silent trees where purple shadows lie
And where, by a rugged ivy'd grot, enriched
With golden withered leaves, a brook bewitched
By the elfish spell of moonbeams babbles on
And mutters of a silent graceful swan
It loves ; and where, upon the whispering grass
Slim fairy dancers laugh and, twinkling, pass !

IN BITTERNESS

Take thou this box,
  O Heart's Desire;
In it lies thy ring
And more, my heart, bleeding;
  Take out thy ring,
  O Heart's Desire,
And, laughing, toss the box
  Into the Fire!

THE ARCHITECT AT SUZANNE

We met a strange old man to-day
(As we strolled in the ruined place)
And he smiled to us as we came his way,
With gentle, wistful grace.

'Ah! Messieurs, it is very sad'
(And he waved at the ruined place),
'I scheme and plan—but it is bad—
(And there was something in his face).

'I am very, very sad to-day'
(And his frail hand touched his brow).
'My dear wife died just yesterday:
Ah! all things are ruined now!'

'This week at Bray I scheme and plan'
(And a strange smile quietly came),
'But next week I must go to Suzanne:
Suzanne? ah! that was her name!'

WOUNDED

I AM not brave
As others seem to be ;
But, like a knave,
I cringe in misery :

I cannot face
With smiles my wound's keen bite ;
And, oh, a furnace
Is my bed at night !

O God, my God,
Give me the strength to see
Thy hand on the rod
That hotly scourges me !

ESCAPE

THINK not of me as facing death,
Tattered, labouring for breath ;
Rather think of one who strays
Dreaming dreams by perfumed ways.

Soon I may die, ah ! true, 'tis true :
But look ! the night is rich with blue
Of peaceful skies, and soft the breeze
Sings in the trembling poplar trees.

And slowly thro' the rustling grass
O'er woodland glade, I, dreaming, pass :
To-morrow ? Death ? Ah ! what are these
But passing childish phantasies.

WORSHIP

I WANDER in the dawn to where the pine wood lies ; the morning air is cool and fragrant with the scent of trees.

I hear the songs of singing birds ; and my path that winds through golden gorse and russet heath is gay with little flowers and grass.

I hear the faint hum of flies ; and the clear cool sound of limpid waters bubbling over moss delights my ear.

All things fill my soul with praise this morning as I walk abroad, alone ; and in the tree-gloomed places of the wood, among old beech leaves and withered ferns, I rest.

WAR DAUBS

I do not ask for dim cathedral place, where windows stained with many colours soil the fresh pure light of opening morn ;

I do not ask for sound of solemn organ, many-voiced and deep, or formal chant of cassocked priest, or written words of other men to mumble ;

Here I am content ; this wood will serve me well ; and here I will sing in praise of God Who fashioned everything, and saw that it was good.

O Lord ! wilt thou accept my song ?

PRAYER

I PRAY to God at night,
Tho' I know not where He is
Nor what He is ;
Nor whether I am right :

I pray to God at night,
And it lifts me from myself ;
I fear no more myself
When I pray to God at night.

A TRIOLET

Weak and faltering, drifting by,
I pray Thee, Lord, take Thou the helm ;
No captain of my soul am I,
Weak and faltering, drifting by !
I do not ask Thee, Whither ? Why ?
Nor urge for tearless, peaceful realm ;
Weak and faltering, drifting by,
I pray Thee, Lord, take Thou the helm !

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